



**TESTIMONY OF
CONNECTICUT HOSPITAL ASSOCIATION
SUBMITTED TO THE
HUMAN SERVICES COMMITTEE
Thursday, March 10, 2022**

**HB 5337, An Act Concerning A “Food Is Medicine Task Force”
And Healthy Eating Incentives**

The Connecticut Hospital Association (CHA) appreciates this opportunity to submit testimony concerning **HB 5337, An Act Concerning A “Food Is Medicine Task Force” And Healthy Eating Incentives**. CHA supports this bill.

Since early 2020, hospitals and health systems have been at the center of Connecticut’s response to the COVID-19 public health emergency, acting as a vital partner with the state and our communities. Hospitals expanded critical care capacity, procured essential equipment and supplies, and stood up countless community COVID-19 testing locations. Hospitals have been an essential component of the statewide vaccine distribution plan including efforts to reach and serve historically under-resourced communities disproportionately affected by the virus. Through it all, hospitals and health systems have continued to provide high-quality care for everyone, regardless of ability to pay. This tireless commitment to the COVID-19 response confirms the value of strong hospitals in Connecticut’s public health infrastructure and the well-being of our communities and reinforces the need for a strong partnership between the state and hospitals.

HB 5337 would establish a "Connecticut Food is Medicine" task force to study ways to improve health outcomes for needy individuals and families through nutritional assistance. Further, it would require the Commissioners of Agriculture, Public Health and Social Services to develop a strategy to increase the numbers of needy individuals and families who purchase fresh fruit and vegetables at farmers' markets, including by establishing a health incentives program through which recipients of supplemental nutritional assistance receive an incentive for buying fresh vegetables and fruits at farmers' markets. HB 5337 also includes the development of a strategy for encouraging expanded enrollment in the Connecticut Farmers' Market/Women, Infants and Children Nutrition Program.

HB 5337 is based on the understanding that poor diet, and its close relation, overweight and obesity, are among the most significant public health challenges today. Unhealthy eating contributes to death and disability, healthcare spending trends, and health disparities, among other outcomes.¹ Diet-related diseases extract an enormous toll on the nation and

¹ [Food is medicine: How US policy is shifting toward nutrition for better health](#)

Connecticut. The Milken Institute finds that the economic and social cost of obesity in America is at an all-time high and continues to rise—roughly 6.76 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) in 2018 compared to 5.57 percent in 2014.² And the problem has only grown worse during the pandemic.³ Diet-related disease trends affect individuals and families and are also felt by government and the business community.

Individuals in urban settings often have the poorest diets, contributing to poor health, lower school performance, lost productivity, increased healthcare costs, and poverty.⁴ Nutritional inequities contribute to health inequities, which have been shown to be much higher for Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) beneficiaries.⁵ These trends result in a disproportionate burden of disease and disability on communities of color.

Bold action is needed to shift away from placing sole responsibility for food choices on individual people, in favor of policies that make it easier for everyone to make healthier choices. Accountability is shared at both the federal and state level to create more equitable access to nutritious foods and to help improve the diet of people in Connecticut. Doing so will help improve the conditions that contribute to disproportionate effects of poor nutrition in communities of color.

Changing incentives is an important element of the solution; however, we need to place equal attention on how we engage communities. Only by involving members of the community that are the focus of these incentives can we expect to take full advantage of these policies and achieve our collective health goals. Hospitals and their cross-sector partners are engaging community members in the conduct of community health needs assessments and community health improvement plans in low-income communities throughout the state. Hospitals—and, by extension, their community partners—should be among those participating in the solution-building process to ensure the state fully realizes the potential for lifestyle change and community benefit. As such, we recommend that the Task Force include a representative of the Connecticut Hospital Association.

HB 5337 applies the idea that meaningful progress on nutrition-related health challenges requires policy changes to make healthier eating the easy, accessible, less expensive option. Leveraging the SNAP program is a great place to begin; increasing subsidies for fruits and vegetables will enable better nutrition and health for low-income families.

Thank you for your consideration of our position. For additional information, contact CHA Government Relations at (203) 294-7310.

² [Weighing Down America: 2020 Update](#)

³ [Longitudinal Trends in Body Mass Index Before and During the COVID-19 Pandemic Among Persons Aged 2–19 Years — United States, 2018–2020](#)

⁴ [Trends and Disparities in Diet Quality Among US Adults by Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Participation Status](#)

⁵ [Americans in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program \(SNAP\) have higher mortality](#)